

1890-1924: Anarchism in Hungary



A history of the anarchist movement, and key anarchists in Hungary up until the aftermath of the 1918 Revolution.

In reaction to the pedestrian Hungarian Social-Democratic Party, founded in 1890, which constantly appealed to the bourgeoisie, often forming alliances with its progressive elements, emerged a far more radical anarchist current. Count Ervin Batthany became friends with Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin whilst in London. He owned huge areas of land in Pannonia, which he proceeded to distribute to the day-labourers and for a while shared their way of life. He founded a school for peasant children, modeled on libertarian educationist [Francisco Ferrer](#)'s principles, on his former estate. He edited an anarchist newspaper *Terstverseg* (Fraternity) in the town of Szombathely, close to the Austrian border. He believed that anarchism could be achieved only by uniting all the social movements, and he gathered trade unionists, cooperators and communalists around him. In 1907 he went to Budapest where he founded a weekly anarchist paper, *Társadalmi Forradalom* (Social Revolution) which continued under various names up until the fall of the Workers' Councils.

To support this weekly, the Union of Revolutionary Socialists was set up. This supported the principles of the International Anarchist Congress of 1907. The anarchist weekly clashed violently with *Nepszava*, the official paper of the Social Democrats. They believed that the unions should be subordinate to their party, and carried out campaigns to recruit unionists.

Istvan Varkonyi and Jenő (or Eugen) Henrik Schmitt were anarchists who began to agitate among the peasants. Son of a farmer, and a horse dealer for many years, Varkonyi was a member of the Social Democrats. Their reformism disheartened him and he left their party in 1896. Influenced by anarchist communism, he founded the Peasant Alliance with a paper, *A Foldemvelő* (The Peasant). He entered into struggle with the Socialists, who, after their efforts to bring the industrial workers under their control, were now attempting to gain the vote of the peasants.

On the 14th February and the 8th September 1897 he convened two conferences where he defined his programme. The land should not be parceled up among the peasants, as the Socialists suggested, but communalised and worked in common. Peasant cooperatives and unions had to be established immediately, with the general strike as a weapon. Helped by Schmitt, a disciple of Tolstoy, Varkonyi prepared the first peasant strike. At harvest-time, the peasants refused to work if their wages were not raised. The landowners were taken aback and called on the government to send in Asiatic immigrants to break the strike. The authorities preferred to send in the Army and forced the peasants to harvest. Six thousand strikers were imprisoned. MPs passed the laws of 1898 against the Peasant Alliance and the

peasant strikers. Varkonyi took up his agitation again in 1904, but only on the Plain, where it quickly collapsed.

Schmidt, who had parted from Varkonyi after the events of 1878 made communist propaganda among the Nazarene sect. This religious cult had developed in Hungary and was in constant struggle with the Minister of War. They were all farmers, were extremely kind towards their animals and due to their mystical resignation, were often taken advantage of by the landowners. Batthany convinced them of the need for an economic programme and showed them the advantages of communism. He suggested the general strike and passive resistance as means of peaceful expropriation. The Nazarenes had 18,000 adherents in Hungary in 1919. In the countryside they were very important in supporting the revolution.

Schmidt subsequently left Hungary for Germany where he lived for the rest of his life, developing the Gnostic philosophy, an amalgam of anarchist individualism and religion!

A farmhand, Sandor Csizmadia by name, born in Oroshaza, attempted to reorganise the rural working class against the landowners. The poverty which affected his area forced him to give up his smallholding and became a railway worker. In 1894, he was imprisoned for anarchist propaganda. He was in prison practically continuously until 1904. He learnt to read and write in jail. Soon he showed his talents as a poet with his *Songs of a Proletarian* (*Proletarkoltemenyek*) and *To the Dawn* (*Hajnel'ban*) which made him famous. He followed this with the Workers' Marseillaise, the Hungarian revolutionary hymn, which was sung on many occasions.

On 13th December 1905 Csizmadia and some friends created the Union of Rural Workers. This organisation grew rapidly. In May 1906 it had 300 groups and 25,000 members, in January 1907 350 groups and 40,000 members. At the Easter conference of the same year it claimed 552 groups and 50,000 members. In August 1907, 75,000 members were in 625 groups. Realising their strength, day labourers and farm domestics went on strike. 4,000 peasants were arrested, and to make sure the domestics carried out their duties, a fine of 400 crowns or 60 days in jail was imposed for those who failed to fulfill their engagements. Finally, the Union was banned by Andrássy, the Minister of the Interior, in 1908.

Csizmadia, arrested in 1906 and then released, was forced to go into hiding on several occasions. He continued his propaganda and contributed to various revolutionary papers to the beginning of the war. One of his friends, Waltner, also known as Jacob, carried on work among the peasants organisations.

The activity of the workers and various anarchist communists won wage rises after each strike, both among day labourers and farm domestics. As a result of anarchist propaganda, Marxist influence in the countryside was minimal.

Ervin Szabo, the director of the Municipal Library of Budapest, was the principal theorist of libertarian syndicalism. Moving from a strict social-democratic position, and as a former editor of *Nepzava*, he placed himself in opposition to the reformist elements in the unions. He made contact with the movement around Schmidt. Batthany helped him financially during his travels in search of a cure for the ailments that were eventually to kill him. A few workers and intellectuals from the group around Schmidt seceded and founded with Szabo a Syndicalist Propaganda Group. Their call for unions independent of social-democracy, found little echo among the workers. The core of the group, a few self-educated workers, stayed with Szabo and was one of the nuclei of the revolutionary groups during the last years of the war. His uncompromising positions on direct action, anti-militarism and anti-statism finally meant that new oppositional forces gathered around him as revulsion against the war and the system that had produced it rose. Young people gathered around him like Ilona Duczynka, Otto Korvin and Imre Sallai (the latter hanged by the Horthy fascists in 1932). Activist artists

like Lajos Kassak and the 'ethical idealists' around Georg Lukacs and Bela Balazs also gathered around him. His premature death on 29th September 1918 was followed by a funeral where many turned out. The workers of Budapest stopped work for a few minutes in his memory. This was to be the opening act in the [1918 Hungarian Revolution](#) that was about to break out.

Just before the war, anarchists in the Union of Revolutionary Socialists had regrouped in the Galileo Circle, alongside anarcho-syndicalists and left socialists. At first, this was a meeting place to discuss freely their differing views on establishing a new society. The war turned this group from abstract discussion to active struggle against militarism and the patriotic clergy. Among them were the young anarchists Otto Korvin and Wessely, son of a rich bourgeois of Budapest. Otto Korvin was rejected for military service because of a deformation of the spine - he incited the marines of Pola to mutiny. His comrades agitated among a regiment of National Guards, who then refused to leave Budapest for the front. Youths of 16, like Wessely, slipped into the barracks at night, distributed leaflets and incited the soldiers to revolt. Captured and beaten by the police, they were interned in concentration camps. Their example helped influence other young people to imitate their actions.

Two anarchists, Ilona Duczynska and her friend Tivadar Lukacs, were at the head of the antiwar movement after Corvin was arrested. Ilona had smuggled the Zimmerwald peace manifest of socialists opposed to the war into Hungary. She had formed a radical youth group to spread propaganda among the munitions workers and then in the armed forces. Arrested in their turn, others took their place. Propaganda increased and was distributed widely. In 1917, the marines of Cattaro rose up, disarming their officers and forming soldiers councils. They were quickly and viciously repressed by Horthy, who was rewarded with the rank of Admiral.

Whitsun 1918, the 6th infantry regiment of Ujvideck at Pecs refused to go to the trenches. They attacked the barracks and municipal buildings and cut telephone wires before occupying the railway station. Surrounded, they resisted for 3 days. Finally they surrendered; One in ten was shot at random. All higher ranking officers involved were shot, and the NCOs all jailed.

The impending defeat of Austria led to the Hungarian regime frantically disassociating itself, and leading to the Hungarian parliament calling for independence. The Karolyi regime came to power, breaking with the Austrians and Germans. Meanwhile, anti-militarist demonstrations were taking place every day in Budapest and other important towns. Soldiers were deserting en masse and setting up soviets (workers' councils). On the 27th and 28th October, they clashed with the police, leading to gunfights with rifles and machine guns. There were many dead and wounded. On the 30th October there was a demonstration in front of Karolyi's party HQ calling for an immediate armistice. The police charged and street fights broke out. Soldiers and workers broke into the home of Count Tisza, head of the reactionary party, and one of those responsible for the war and shot him dead the following day. On the 1st November the crowds massed on the streets, invaded the police stations and disarmed the police. 400,000 people marched through the streets singing the Workers' Marseillaise!

Karolyi attempted to negotiate an armistice with the Entente, but was forced to resign when France backed demands that could not be met.

Tibor Szamuely was the oldest son of five children of a Jewish family. After university, he became a journalist. He read Szabo and Batthany and became an anarchist. He was called up and sent to the Russian front. He deserted from the trenches on the first evening there. In 1918 he visited Kropotkin in Dimitri village near Moscow. At Moscow Szamuely organized a Communist group in concert with Bela Kun, among the Hungarian prisoners of war. He returned to Hungary and incited the anarchists to join the new Communist Party. All the

anarchosyndicalists did so, as did many in the Galileo Circle in December 1918. This Communist Party, like other Western communist parties, was made up predominantly of syndicalists and anarchists, and like them had a libertarian outlook and practice before Bolshevisation was to change all this. Alongside Szamuely, was the Romanian lawyer Kagan (shot by the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1925), Korvin, Karolyi Krausz, the chief editor of the anarchist daily Tarsadalmi Forradalom, Csizmadia, the psychologist Varjas and George Lukacs. The latter was already an academic known throughout the world. Influenced by Szabo, he had taken part in antimilitarist activities and during the ensuing Commune energetically went from factory to village to trench to orate passionately for the revolution.

In December Szamuely fomented a riot at Nyiregykaze, in which one of his brothers was seriously wounded. A month later, he attempted to overthrow the republican authorities at Satoraljaujhely. Arrested, he managed to escape. He hid for a while with the anarchist writer Jassak, who edited the magazine Ma (Today). From there, he was able to establish links with the factory councils in Csepel, and to prepare with them, the events of 23rd March.

Workers of the Manfred Weisz factory on Csepel island, near Budapest, who had gained control of their factory in November 1918, decided to join the Communist Party to the number of 20,000 on 18th March 1919! On 23rd March, they decided to arm themselves and march to Budapest to overthrow the Karolyi government. The Csepel workers were to inscribe themselves in the annals of working class history twice more when they took part in the first strike under the Russian occupation in 1945, and then again in [1956 when they had a leading role in the revolution](#).

The night of 21 March, Bela Kun and his associates were liberated from prison by the crowd. The workplace councils declared a council republic.

The history of the Hungarian Council Republic requires an article of its own. Let's just note the role of some anarchists.

Some, as in Russia, gave full support to the new regime, serving as commissars and other officials. Others began to have grave doubts about the direction of the Communist Party with the increasing Bolshevisation by Bela Kun and his associates. This came to a head with the merger of the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party - the Social Democratic Party which had sent thousands of workers to their death in the war, who had shot 100 miners in one day in January 1919! Some revolutionaries broke away, and set up the Anarchist Union. These included Kagan, Bojtor and Krausz. They seized the Almassy Palace. Bojtor and Kagan began to fiercely criticise the behaviour of certain officials of the regime, including Kun himself. They were imprisoned, but anarchists still in the Party intervened and had them freed. Some anarchists who supported the new regime had a change of heart and joined the Almassyists. Csizmadia resigned his post at the Agriculture Department. Lukacs, Korvin and Szamuely continued their support of the Party. Korvin used his influence to get meeting rooms for the Almassyists, helped them set up a library, and supported their papers. But the revolutionary opposition failed to go beyond propagation of their ideas and to take the movement back from Kun and the new Unified Socialist Party, even if, like Kagan, they seized arms from barracks.

Those who remained in the Party gave it a revolutionary cover by taking posts in the administration, rather than breaking with the sabotage of Kun. They were to pay a heavy price for this.

Other radicals attempted to regroup around an Anarchist Party but were demobilised by Kun, who convinced them to go to the front, just as he did with the Austrian volunteers of Rothziegel.

Tibor Szamuely took charge of the red terror. 129 people were hanged or shot, of which 40 deaths were ordered by him.

With the collapse of the Commune, Otto Korvin was arrested. He was tortured horribly. In order to find out where his comrades were hidden, his genitals were burnt with a red hot iron. He refused to reveal anything and was hanged.

Three anarchists who had fled to Vienna, Stassny, Feldmar and Mauthner, made an attempt to save Korvin and other libertarians. They returned to Budapest, but were betrayed by Csuvára, the ex-secretary of Bela Kun. Marcel Feldmar, a medical student, was beaten to death in his cell by Horthy's thugs in 1920. Professor Stassny was hanged. Mauthner was sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted. He managed to escape, on 21st June 1921, and made his way to France. His friends in Budapest, the Rabinovics brothers and a younger brother of Szamuely, had their throats cut or were hanged. The survivors of the attempt stabbed Csuvára to death.

Szamuely attempted to escape across the Austrian border. He was betrayed, and he was beaten to death by the police. His body was hacked to pieces by local peasants and scattered in the fields.

The White Terror unleashed on the working class was terrible and brutal. The Csepel workers' militias surrendered and 1,000 of them were machine-gunned on 10th August. Revolutionaries were hunted down in town and countryside, many of them tortured to death.

After the collapse, the remaining anarchists concealed themselves in the Gnostic Circles that had been set up by Schmitt. They established contact with the outside world and with prisoners in the concentration camps. They brought out leaflets and a duplicated paper *Uj Világ*. In 1924, after the White Terror seemed to have abated a little, they re-entered the unions and the cooperatives and attempted to build with other elements, the Hungarian Social-Libertarian Party. But the leading militants were arrested and imprisoned and they were forced to go underground again.

By Nick Heath

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